

The art of community

Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild park opens in Lincoln

By Marga Lincoln

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A house made of sky is just one of the startlingly beautiful sculptures a visitor encounters in the new Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild sculpture park in Lincoln.

The park opened Oct. 4, across the highway from the U.S. Forest Service office in Lincoln.

Caleb Fey of the Holter Museum of Art gave the keynote talk. The five internationally acclaimed artists who created the sculptures were on hand to talk about their works. And Blackfeet musician Jack Gladstone gave a blessing and musical performance.

On Thursday morning, Oct. 2, in snow and sleet and under blustery winter skies, the five artists put the finishing touches on their pieces.

And in the wintry hubbub of flying snow, a small army of Lincoln citizens were out with front-end loaders and forklifts, ladders and pickup trucks and blow torches, working side by side with the artists who have become their friends.

And traipsing across the landscape for several hours were a troupe of fifth graders from Bonner School, who are among 350 students who have visited the site in the past few weeks.

Wild indeed

Unlike other sculpture parks that are well-manicured grassy expanses, Sculpture in the Wild is just that – roughly hewn from the Ponderosa and lodgepole forest on a 28-acre parcel of public land.

Many of the sculptures are literally created from the surrounding land and speak to Montana's landscape, its people, history and culture.

The vision started with award-winning Irish artist Kevin O'Dwyer, a metalsmith and sculptor, who first visited Lincoln several years ago as a guest of master bladesmith Rick Dunkerley.

O'Dwyer was also the spark behind creating Sculpture in the Parklands, a 50-acre sculpture park in Ireland that's built on an old peat-harvesting site.

"I called a dozen or 15 community members," said project manager Dunkerley, as he sat in his pickup truck Thursday morning, as snow swirled across his windshield.

"It was so overwhelmingly positive," he said of the community response to the idea. "The reaction has been fantastic from everyone who comes out.

"Kevin knew all these sculptors," who he'd worked with, said Dunkerley, of how the vision came together.

Among those who joined the effort are Irish artist Alan Counihan, Finnish sculptor Jaakko Pernu, Danish environmental sculptor Jorn Ronnau and New York artist Steven Siegel.

The vision is to make the sculpture park a visitor destination, said Dunkerley. The Sculpture in the Parklands draws 50,000 visitors a year in Ireland.

"One of my motivations," said Dunkerley, "is that it would be a nice identity for Lincoln. I thought we could have a dozen permanent sculptures, bringing in artists for the next two to three years."

All the funds raised, \$110,000 so far, have come from private sources.



Steven Siegel discusses his work, "Hill and Valley" during the opening of Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild park near Lincoln.

"Amazing" community effort

But beyond the thousands of dollars raised, community members have given an untold number of hours – estimated in the thousands.

It's a community response that the artists, who've worked on sculpture parks all over the world, find incredibly moving.

"Amazing!" said Counihan, of the community effort. He created the sculpture "House of Sky," inspired by Ivan Doig's book by that name. His sculpture of a small house made of mirror-finished stainless steel is perched on 21-foot-high poles that reach high into the sky. There the house reflects the ever-changing beauty of Montana's sky.

After reading Doig's book, the vision for the artwork came to Counihan, but he never could have accomplished it without the help of Lincoln volunteers, he said.

"People have given up three weeks of work and worked every day," he said. "That's truly remarkable. I wouldn't have managed this.

"It's a community adventure and this will really flower," he said.

This is a sentiment echoed by O'Dwyer.

"The community has been absolutely amazing," he said. "We've all worked in symposia around the world, but none of us have come across this type of community spirit – people who have donated time and equipment and manpower. It's been a real treat to work here."

On Thursday prior to the opening, O'Dwyer was working with a small group of volunteers trying to maneuver the three

pieces of his sculpture, "Teepee Burner," into place. But the sheer size and weight of the pieces, an actual historic teepee burner from a



"Gateway of Change Arch" by Danish sculptor Jorn Ronnau

nearby mill, was beyond what their equipment could handle.

O'Dwyer realizes a vision doesn't come together in a day – nor in this case, would his "Teepee Burner."

Fascinated with industrial archaeology, O'Dwyer created a work that celebrates the history of logging and milling, which has been a huge part of Lincoln's history. Eventually, he'd like the inner space of "Teepee Burner" to be a performance and lecture space that also shows archival photos of the early logging and milling history of the area.

International appeal

Other sculptures in the finishing stages are "Montana Line Drawing," a metal sculpture by O'Dwyer; "Hill and Valley," a "rock wall" landscape

construction built of newspapers by Siegel; Pernu's "Portrait," a large frame-like sculpture of intertwined spruce branches held in a metal frame; and Ronnau's "Gateway of Change Arch," built of downed Ponderosa pines, creating a gateway of massive wood, engraved with poetry, looking out onto a golden fantasy village.

"Isn't it amazing?" said Lisa Smith, one of the volunteers on hand, working with her husband Mark, who had brought some of their heavy equipment to the site.

"I think the beauty of the project," she said, "is that it roots our focus back to the land. It makes us really think about the layers of time."

This is more than a Lincoln project, she said, it's brought people from all over the watershed, from loggers to ranchers to students to shopkeepers and equipment operators.

"This is not just for Lincoln," she said. "This is a gift for all people to reflect on the land and each other and to find ways to work together in a sustainable way."

She hopes it draws in visitors internationally, as have similar sculpture parks in the world.

"It's not a park," she said. "It's not a tourist trap. It's a natural place. ... It's rooted at the basic level in the landscape."

"I tell you, I'm really impressed with Lincoln," said Helena artist Jennifer Thompson, who has volunteered the past few weeks. "You wouldn't believe the backhoes, the bobcats, the front-end loaders" that showed up. She watched ex-loggers working side by side with the sculptors.

"This is the best thing in many years for Lincoln," said Becky Garland, a Lincoln business owner who's been out at the site volunteering the past few weeks. "It's positive. It's new. If you could count the man hours and equipment hours, I bet it's six figures."

Garland loves that "she's traveled around the world," with the new friendships she's made with the visiting artists.

And despite the bitter cold, she was smiling.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Garland said of the experience. "You don't want to miss it."

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13



"Montana Line Drawing" by Irish artist Kevin O'Dwyer



"Portrait" by Finnish sculptor Jaakko Pernu